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per una storia delle dottrine



Stupor et mirabilia! The Ascent of an Early Modern Redeemer

Stupor et mirabilia!
L'ascesa di una redentrica della prima età moderna

Unn Falkeid

unn.falkeid@ifikk.uio.no

University of Oslo

ABSTRACT

Santa Birgitta di Svezia (1303-1373), una delle più importanti visionarie del tardo Medioevo, fu celebrata come profetessa e sibilla fino a tutto il XVII secolo. È opinione comune che lo status di profetessa di Birgitta sia stato costruito dai suoi sostenitori dopo la sua morte. Di contro, la mia tesi è che la costruzione dell'immagine di profetessa sia stata il risultato di una strategia scientemente elaborata fin dall'inizio della sua esperienza profetica e alla quale hanno contribuito con attenzione sia i suoi sostenitori sia lei stessa. Le tracce di questa costruzione possono essere rinvenute nei primi resoconti degli agiografi, nel vivo appoggio dei confessori e dei numerosi testimoni al processo di canonizzazione. Tuttavia, le testimonianze più forti dell'aspirazione profetica di Birgitta si trovano nelle sue stesse rivelazioni, che sono al centro di questo saggio.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Santa Birgitta di Svezia; Profeta; Mosè rinato; Elia redivivo; Redentrica.

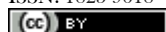
Saint Birgitta of Sweden (1303-1373), one of the most powerful visionary women from the late Middle Ages, was celebrated as a prophet and a sibyl long into seventeenth century. A common suggestion has been that Birgitta's prophetic status was crafted by her supporters after her death. My claim, however, is that the construction of the prophet was the result of a highly conscious strategy which followed Birgitta from the very beginning of her visionary career, and to which both her supporters and she herself carefully contributed. We meet the traces of such a construction in the earliest hagiographers' accounts, in the confessors' ardent supports, and in the many witnesses from the canonization process. Yet, the strongest testimonies of the prophet in spe, is to be found in Birgitta's own revelations, which is the focus of this article.

KEYWORDS: Saint Birgitta of Sweden; Prophet; Reborn Moses; Elijah Redivivus; Female Redeemer.

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The earliest complete printed edition of Saint Birgitta of Sweden's *Liber celestis revelacionum* («The Heavenly Book of Revelations», hereafter *Revelations*), printed by Bartholomaeus Ghotan in Lübeck in 1492, comprises a series of full-page woodcuts¹. Throughout these woodcuts the saint is configured in different ways as a mediator, receiving revelations from divine powers, while at the same time bestowing them in form of a book to her audience. One of them is accompanied with a quotation, obviously meant as an explanation for what the reader now experiences. Birgitta of Sweden, or Birgitta Birgersdotter (1303–1373) which was her original name, is depicted while handing over the book to a bishop, presumably her latest confessor and collaborator Alfonso Pecha, the former bishop of Jaén in Andalusia, and the quotation, which is taken from Birgitta's eighth book of *Revelations*, reads as follows:

I [God] am like a carpenter who cuts wood from the forest and carries it home, then carves a beautiful image and adorns it with colors and contours. His friends see that the image can be adorned with still more beautiful colors, and so they paint it with their own colors. I, God, cut words from the forest of my divinity and placed them in your heart. My friends edited and arranged them in books, coloring and adorning them according to the grace given them. Now in order to adapt them to several languages, give all these books containing revelations of my words to my bishop hermit².

The quotation is usually interpreted as Birgitta's permission of Alfonso to compile, edit, and verify her revelations³. However, in Ghotan's edition, commissioned by Vadstena Abbey in honour of the centenary of Birgitta's canonization, the meaning of the words slightly changes. Indeed, the book clearly testifies to the central role of prophecies in the early printing history: the woodcut persuades the reader to associate prophecy with the production of the very book itself⁴. What Birgitta's revelations and the book have in common is that they claim to convey the will of divine powers. Both transmit the words of God.

Ghotan's visual program was not a novelty regarding the representation of the Swedish saint. By the time the German print was produced, Birgitta's *Revelations* had for more than a century circulated in manuscripts and partly also in print, and the illuminations following these editions repeatedly configured Birgitta with a pen and a book in

¹ The complete works of Birgitta are published by Oxford University Press, translated by Denis Searby, with an introduction and notes by Bridget Morris: *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden: Vol. 1 Books I-III: Liber caelestis* (2006); *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden: Vol. 2 Books IV-V: Liber caelestis* (2008); *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden: 3: Liber caelestis: Books VI-VII* (2012); *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden: Vol. 4: The Heavenly Emperor's Book to Kings, The Rule, and Minor Works*. All English quotations from Birgitta's *Revelations* in this article are taken from Searby's and Morris' publications.

² BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Extrav.* 49, 1–4. English transl., Vol 4, p. 267.

³ See for instance Claire Sahlin's thorough explanation of this passage, in C. SAHLIN, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2001, pp. 32–34. For the printed *editio princeps* of Birgitta's *Revelations*, see B. MORRIS, *General Introduction*, in BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. I. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 21–22. The figure of carpenter often appears in the Bible, but I have never seen it used as Birgitta is deploying the image.

⁴ In his book, *Printing and Prophecy. Prognostication and Media Change 1450-1550*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2012, Jonathan Green has explored the close connection between the role of prophecies in the early printing history. Indeed, evidence of the close connection between prophecies and early prints, is the oldest printed book we know with movable types. The fragment of the *Sibyllenbuch*, or *Book of the Sibyls*, which contains prophecies concerning the fate of the Holy Roman Empire is assigned to Gutenberg's earliest years in Mainz in the period between 1444 and 1447, and thus almost a decade before Gutenberg's famous print of the Bible. J. GREENE, *Printing and Prophecy*, pp. 16–17.



hand in the moment of receiving her divine visions. As such, Ghotan's edition only fixed a well-established program already connected to the *Revelations*, as the art historian Maria H. Oen convincingly has argued⁵. The visual program emerged in the Birgittine scriptorium in Naples in the second half of the 1370s in the wake of Alfonso's first compilation of Birgitta's *Revelations*. With the intent of convincing secular and ecclesiastic leaders to support the canonizing petition, the scriptorium produced luxurious illuminated codices in which Birgitta's sanctity was made evident. The aim was to persuade the recipients of the heavenly origin of Birgitta's *Revelations*, and with this «boldly implying that they deserved the same status as the Scripture»⁶. In other words, the Neapolitan visual program, which in the coming century was disseminated widely alongside the dispersion of the *Revelations*, simply compared the Swedish saint with the human scribes of the Holy Scripture. My question is: How was this possible? How could Birgitta, a widow from the far north, achieve such an extraordinary authority?

Birgitta's success may partly be explained by her extraordinary biography⁷. Born into the powerful Folkung dynasty she belonged to the nobility with close links to the Swedish Norwegian royal family. The sources therefore sometimes call her *principessa*, «a princess from the Kingdom of Sweden», and throughout her long life she associated with noble families in Europe⁸. At the age of thirteen, she married the Swedish knight and lawman Ulf Gudmarsson, to whom she bore eight children. When Ulf died, Birgitta left Sweden in 1349 and settled in Rome, where she soon established herself as one of the most outspoken critics of the Avignon papacy in her time, alongside figures such as Dante, Marsilius of Padua, William of Ockham, and Catherine of Siena⁹. She was also an eager promoter of a thorough spiritual and ecclesiastic reform, and one of her achievements in this context was the establishment of a new monastic order, the *Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris*, which still exist today, and which is described as the first order founded by a woman «of her own devising»¹⁰. All this—Birgitta's eager resistance against the Avignon papacy, her attempts to restore Rome as the political and religious centre of the Christian world, her monastic rule, and vast literary oeuvre—have given Birgitta the reputation as one of the most powerful visionaries of the late Middle Ages.

⁵ M.H. OEN, *The Iconography of Liber celestis revelacionum*, in M.H. OEN (ed), *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, Leiden, Brill, 2019, pp. 186-222; p. 186.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 187.

⁷ For a rich biography of Birgitta of Sweden, see B. MORRIS, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 1999.

⁸ Alfonso describes her as a «*principessa de regno Suecie*», both in his *Informaciones* § 3 and his *Prologus Libri Celestis* § 2. See A. JÖNSSON, *St. Bridget's Revelations to the Popes. An Edition to the So-Called Tractatus de summis pontificibus*, Lund, Lund University Press, 1997, p. 63.

⁹ In my book *The Avignon Papacy Contested*, I have profoundly analysed and compared how those six thinkers criticized the Roman curia's move to the Southern France and how they responded to the crisis of legitimacy as the Avignon Papacy caused. See U. FALKEID, *The Avignon Papacy Contested. An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2017.

¹⁰ B. MORRIS, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 1.

Birgitta and her supporters never explicitly called her a prophet. Still, it was above all as a prophet she was taken in the centuries after her death in 1373¹¹. Birgitta's *Revelations*, either in its entirety or in extracts, as well as a series of apocryphal visions and prayers both in Latin and vernacular, circulated widely in early modern Europe, and she was recurrently referred to as a prophet, or a sibyl of modern times. In this article, however, I will examine extracts of the earliest textual sources that laid the very foundation for this interpretation, and which Alfonso and the Neapolitan scriptorium only continued and further strengthened. My claim is that the construction of the prophet was the result of a highly conscious strategy which followed Birgitta from the very beginning of her visionary career, that is, when she still lived in Sweden, and to which both her supporters and she herself carefully contributed. We meet the traces of such a construction in the earliest hagiographers' accounts, in the confessors' ardent supports, and in the many witnesses from the canonization process. Yet, the strongest testimonies of the prophet *in spe*, is to be found in Birgitta's own revelations, which is the focus of this article.

1. Moses returned

Birgitta's earliest visions, that is, the visions she presumably received and recorded between 1344 and 1349 while she still was living in Sweden, is clearly crafted on two categories of models—the Hebrew prophets and the Christian evangelists, although a third one may also be discerned. According to the chronology of her vocation, already her first vision, often dubbed «the calling vision», created the ground for the future prophet.

Some days after her husband's death, when blessed Birgitta was anxious about her situation, the Spirit of the Lord surrounded and inflamed her. Rapt in spirit, she saw a bright cloud, and out of the cloud she heard a voice saying to her: «I am your God, and I want to speak with you». Afraid that it might be a trick of the enemy, she heard again: Do not fear. I am the maker of the universe not the seducer. Rest assured that I am not speaking for your sake but for the sake of the salvation of all Christians. Listen to what I have to say. You will be my bride and my conduit. You will hear and see spiritual and heavenly mysteries, and my Spirit will remain with you until death¹².

As the vision makes clear, Birgitta had recently changed her social status. Her husband has passed away, and the widow, who is now about 43 years old and mother to

¹¹ For a broad study on the diffusion of Birgitta's revelations in the Italian Renaissance and her reputation as a prophet, see U. FALKEID - A. WAINWRIGHT (eds), *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden. Women, Politics and Reform in Renaissance Italy*, Leiden, Brill (forthcoming). See also the important work of M. LODONE, *Santa Brigida in Toscana. Volgarizzamenti e riscritture profetiche*, «Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia», LXXIII, 1/2019, pp. 69-84; D. PEZZINI, *The Italian Reception of Birgittine Writings*, in V. O'HARA - B. MORRIS (eds), *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into Medieval Vernaculars*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2000, pp. 186-212; O. FERM - A. PERRICCIOLI SAGGESE - M. ROTILI (eds), *Santa Brigida, Napoli, L'Italia, Atti del convegno di studi italiano-svedese, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 10-11 maggio 2006*, Napoli, Arte tipografica, 2006; O. NICCOLI, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*. Transl. by Lydia Cochrane. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1990.

¹² BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Extrav.* 47. English transl., Vol. 4, pp. 264-265. The vision is also rendered in the canonization testimonies, gathered in *Acta et processus*, pp. 80-81. See I. COLLIJN (ed), *Acta et processus canonizationis beate Birgittae*, Uppsala, Almqvist and Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1924-1941.



several children, is invited to enter a new career¹³. The noteworthy aspect of this quotation, though, is how Birgitta is presented as a prophet, not very different from the Hebrew prophets, rather than a Christian mystic, which was a far more common portrayal of visionary women in the Middle Ages. Rather than dictating an inner, spiritual journey culminating in her mystical union with God, the calling vision emphasizes Birgitta's active role in the world's salvation. God's demand clearly echoes the words to Jeremiah: «For you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you» (Jeremiah 1:7-9). In a similar way, Birgitta receives a specific mission. As God tells her, he is not speaking for her own sake, but for the salvation of others, and she shall be his *sponsa et canale*—his bride and channel.

The calling vision as well as a series of other visions from the earliest years present Birgitta as a prophet in the Weberian sense of the word: She is depicted as a person who, owing to gifts of grace (charisma), offers herself as a spiritual guide¹⁴. Obediently, and with an irresistible sense of personal mission, she transmits the will of God in the world. Yet, not only the form, but also the content of Birgitta's visions clearly underscores the association with the Hebrew prophets. The *Revelations* convey inspired knowledge concerning matters normally hidden from human knowledge, and they communicate knowledge both about past, present, and future. As such, Birgitta's *Revelations* follow the pattern of Gregory the Great's classical discussion of prophecy, as also Claire Sahlin has noticed¹⁵. Of equal interest, is how close they are to Thomas Aquinas' description of *prophetia comminationis*.

Thomas distinguished between different types of prophecy¹⁶. Those prophecies concerning divine vengeance or wrath, he categorized as comminations. They conveyed threats, but also sparks of promise and hope, as the quotation from Jeremiah to whom he is referring, reveals: «I will suddenly speak against a nation, and against a kingdom, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy it. If that nation against which I have spoken, shall repent of their evil, I also will repent of the evil that I have thought to do them» (Jeremiah 18:7-8). It is this wrath, the furious anger of God, but also the elements of hope, which resound in Birgitta's visions from the very beginning. In the first book of her *Revelations*, the widow reproaches the Swedish aristocracy and depraved priests. She continually accuses disloyal knights, lukewarm servants, and disrespectful sinners in general, comparing them with wild beasts (*Rev. I: 6*), ugly frogs (*Rev. I: 21*), bumblebees

¹³ The expression is taken from R. BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Western Schism, 1378-1417*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004, p. 7.

¹⁴ M. WEBER, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (1922), Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, p. 64. See also C. SAHLIN, *Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 43.

¹⁵ C. SAHLIN, *Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 36. For Gregory's discussion of prophecy, see Gregorius Magnus, *Homiliae in Hiezechielhelem Prophetam*, ed. M. Adriaen, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, CCL 142, Turnhout, Brepols, 1971.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 174, a. 1; ed. and trans. Roland Potter, vol. 45: «Prophecy and Other Charisms», New York, Blackfriars in conjunction with McGraw-Hill, 1984, pp. 68-71. See also C. SAHLIN, *Birgitta of Sweden*, pp. 36-43.

that gather earthly honey for themselves (*Rev. I: 44*), and idolators (*Rev. I: 48*). At the same time, she encourages them to turn away from their sinful life and follow the path of repentance and penance.

Then, in the very last vision of the first book (*Rev. I: 60*), something extraordinary happens. In the opening greetings, Christ aligns her with Moses: «I am the God of Israel, the one who spoke with Moses» From what follows, Birgitta's mission is made clear. Her undertaking is to lead her Christian fellows, despite their reluctance, to salvation. According to Christ's explanation, Birgitta may in fact be even more successful than Moses in this task:

Although some of the Hebrews lacked confidence in Moses, nevertheless they all crossed the Red Sea with him into the desert where the ones who were lacking in confidence and worshipped idols and provoked God to anger, which is why they also met their end in a miserable death, although only those who had bad faith [...] Accordingly, in the same way as those Hebrews who neither believed in God nor in Moses yet left Egypt for the promised land, being, as it were, forced along together with the others, so too, many Christians will now go out unwillingly together with my chosen ones, not trusting in my power to save them. They do not believe in my words by any means; they have only a false hope in my power. Nevertheless, my words shall be fulfilled without their willing it, and they shall, as it were, be forced along to perfection until they get to where it suits me¹⁷.

As we see from this quotation, God gives Birgitta the very same mission as he once entrusted Moses. The Hebrew prophet partly failed, loosing idolators in the desert where they «met their end in a miserable death». Yet, the road is open for new victories. With Birgitta's help, God will force people with false hope to the promised land. The difference now is that the salvation is available for the entire humanity, conveyed by the idea of the all-embracing Catholic Church, and not only for the chosen Israelites, as in Moses' case.

This is not the only reference to Moses. Throughout the *Revelations*, Birgitta is repeatedly compared with the old prophet. In an early vision dated to the 1340s, Christ tells her: «You will also hear my voice as it spoke to Moses from within the bush. This same voice is now speaking within your soul»¹⁸. In other visions she is encouraged to be brave as Moses once was (*Rev. II: 28*); she is called to renew the human hearts just as Moses freed his people (*Rev. III: 5*); she will meet people who are just as opposed to God's words as those unbelievers who contradicted the words of Moses in the desert (*Extrav. 19*); and her words must be approved just like the words of Moses and the prophets once were read and examined:

Neither Moses nor the prophets were read without approval and examination of the high priests. Similarly, my words should not be brought to light without the authority and approval of the high priests to whom I have given the power of binding and losing. He who rejects them, scorns me¹⁹.

¹⁷ BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Rev. I: 60*. English transl., Vol. 1, pp. 163-164.

¹⁸ BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Rev. II: 10*. English transl., Vol. 1, p. 200.

¹⁹ BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Extrav. 37*. English transl., Vol. 4, p. 259.



As a series of people contributed to the composition of the *Revelations*, this final explanation may have been added by one of Birgitta's confessors, whether it be her earliest biographers, Prior or Magister Peter, her Swedish confessor Mathias of Linköping, or the Spanish bishop and editor Alfonso Pecha.²⁰ What is important in our context, however, is that Birgitta was from the very beginning associated with Moses, the greatest of all the prophets according to medieval theologians. As the sources depict her, the divine powers worked through the widow in order to rebuke the sinners and to pronounce God's judgment of the world. Indeed, Birgitta was the reborn Moses, a towering rock of power and hope, who would direct or re-direct her contemporary fellows to salvation.²¹

2. The new evangelist

The quotation from the Ghothan edition professed that Birgitta's *Liber celestis revelationum* contained revelations of God's words. As Christ exhorts her: «[...] give all these books containing revelations of my words to my bishop hermit»²². Later, Christ explains that his spirit separates the chosen ones from each other regarding the process of writing. Some examine God's words and ponder them in their heart, and only after much thought they are able to explain the words more clearly and express them in a better way. This applies to Birgitta as well, according to Christ:

Your own heart is not always capable and enough on fire to express in writing the things you experience. Often instead you consider and reconsider them in your mind, and then you write and rewrite them, until you arrive at the true meaning of my words. In a similar way my Spirit used to ascend and descend on the evangelists and doctors of the Church. At certain times they would set down some things that had to be corrected, at other times things that had to be revised later, at still other times they were examined and reprimanded by others. [...] And yet all my evangelists received the words of my Spirit through inspiration and declared them and wrote them down²³.

A striking aspect of this quotation is how it discusses the complex process of translating and writing down the words of God. The underlying question is: how is it possible to transfer the ineffable words of God into a human language? Of equal interest is how Christ now aligns Birgitta with the Biblical evangelists. As famously argued by Alastair Minnis, the Biblical evangelists represented the highest level or the scholastic hierarchy of *auctores*²⁴. Their *auctoritas* emerged through their mystical production and

²⁰ For the editorial work and textual history of Birgitta's *Revelations*, see B. MORRIS, *General Introduction*, in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. 1, pp. 11-25.

²¹ For a useful study of interpretations of Moses in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, see S. BASSI, *Images of Moses in the Renaissance*, in A. DEL PRETE - A.L. SCHINO - P. TOTARO, *The Philosophers and the Bible, The Debate on Sacred Scripture in Early Modern Thought*, Leiden, Brill, 2021.

²² BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Extrav.* 49. English transl., Vol. 4, p. 267.

²³ *Ivi*, pp. 267-268.

²⁴ A. MINNIS, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, 1984 (2nd ed. 2009). For the discussion of the term «author» and the role of the author in the Middle Ages, see also J. SUMMIT J., *Women and Authorship*, in C. DINSHAW - D. WALLACE (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 91-108; A.R. ASCOLI, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

dissemination of the words of God, the only true auctor and the guarantor of the human language. What happens in Birgitta's vision, though, is that she is located at the very same level as the human scribes of God's words. Indeed, Birgitta's mission reflects the etymological sense of the noun «evangelist»: She is a translator or «messenger of the good news»—and of importance is that this messenger is now a woman, in contrast to the male evangelists of the New Testament.

As already noticed, the promotion of Birgitta as an evangelist was part of the visual program produced in the Neapolitan scriptorium, and she was depicted as a divinely inspired human scribes for centuries. The idea was, however, deeply rooted in Birgitta's own revelations, and once again we see the traces of such associations already in the initial phase of her visionary career. Indeed, one of the earliest visions she presumably received shortly after her calling vision depicted Birgitta exactly as a new evangelist.

On Christmas Eve, Birgitta shall have experienced «such a great and wonderful feeling of exultation [...] in [her] heart that she could scarcely contain herself for joy». This tremendous joy was accompanied by «a wonderful sensible movement in her heart like that of a living child turning and turning around»²⁵. Soon after, the Virgin Mary came to her explaining that the motion, which resembled the conception of the child Jesus in her own womb, was a sign of Birgitta's calling as an instrument for divine revelation. As the receiver of the incarnated Word her mission is to translate and proclaim God's will throughout the world. Similar identifications with Mary run like a thread throughout the *Revelations*, conveying in different ways the idea that God's mother offered Birgitta the authority of an evangelist, supporting her power to teach, write and speak on behalf of God²⁶. In other words, the idea is that Birgitta's mystical pregnancy turned her heart, like Mary's womb, into a vessel filled with the word of God.

In several revelations Birgitta's mission is compared to that of an evangelist. She is quite often depicted as struggling to find the right words for what she has experienced (i.e. *Rev. IV: 2*), and from time to time she is discussing with the evangelists in persons, such as in *Rev. 4: 1*, in which St. John appears to her, and in *Rev. IV: 129*, in which she talks with St. Matthew. She is also repeatedly compared with the apostles. In a vision dated both to Sweden in the 1340s and Rome in the 1360s, God the Father speaks to her: «In my divine nature I assumed a human nature from a virgin. Through that human nature I spoke and preached to the nations. I also sent the Holy Spirit to the apostles and spoke through them and their tongues, just as I speak every day by means of spiritual inspiration to whomever I want»²⁷. The meaning is quite clear: Birgitta is nominated God's new apostle. Likewise, in an early vision Christ urges her to go out into the

²⁵ BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Rev. VI: 88*. English transl., Vol. 3, p. 155.

²⁶ See C. SAHLIN, *Mystical Pregnancy and Prophecy in the Revelations: Birgitta's Identification with Virgin Mary*, in C. SAHLIN, *Birgitta of Sweden*, pp. 78–109. On Birgitta's Mariology see also U. FALKEID, *Constructing Female Authority: Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and the Two Marys*, in M.H. OEN – U. FALKEID (eds), *Sanctity and Female Authorship. Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, New York and London, Routledge, 2020, pp. 54–74.

²⁷ BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Rev. VIII: 56*. English transl., Vol. 4, p. 97.



world, just like Peter and Paul once did, rather than enjoying «the sweet delight» of the Holy spirit in closure:

However, in order that others might be made participants in their sweet delight and in order to instruct others along with themselves, they [Peter and Paul] preferred to go out for other people's sake as well as for their own greater glory and not to remain by themselves without strengthening others with the grace given²⁸.

Birgitta's mission is once again specified as a task of leaving home and to go forth into the world, preaching the good news to the many. Of great significance is that this exhortation comes in a period with strong resistance against women's public voice. As discussed by several scholars, the attempts to regulate female instructive voices were rooted in Biblical commands (2 Cor. 14:34-35, 1 Tim. 2:12), and later codified in *Decretum Gratiani*²⁹. Moreover, the critique of female preachers was a returning subject among medieval theologians, especially in the wake of the beguines, the growing group of lay women in European cities, who choose to live in semi-monastic communities without taking any formal religious vows, and who increasingly expressed themselves on theological and ecclesiastic questions³⁰. The critique against the beguines increased, and when their preaching and independent life-style became a central question during the Council of Vienne in 1311-12, the movement was severely condemned.

Birgitta's *Revelations*, composed in the decades after the condemnation and prosecution of the beguines, obviously transgressed the normative boundaries of female behavior, something that came to have serious consequences for her reputation. Despite canonized in 1391, her sanctity was strongly contested in the following century, as was also the claimed celestial and evangelic status of her revelations³¹.

3. Elijah redivivus

Alfonso Pecha, Birgitta's latest confessor and the editor of the *Revelations*, was cautious in his configuration of the Swedish saint as evangelist. He was probably highly aware of the opposition against women's public voice and religious instructions, and the damage it might inflict on Birgitta's saintly status. In his famous introduction to the eighth book of the *Revelations*, the so-called *Epistola solitarii ad reges* (The Hermit's Letter to Kings), he downplayed the human element of the writing process and rather

²⁸ BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Rev.* II:14, 62. English transl., Vol. 1, p. 212.

²⁹ On the resistance against women's religious instructions in the Middle Ages, see for instance R. VOADEN, *God's Words, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries*, Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 1999; D. ELLIOT, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2004; A. MINNIS – R. VOADEN (eds), *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition, c. 1100-1500*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010.

³⁰ For a classical study about the beguines, see E.H. MCDONNELL, *The Beguines and the Beghards in Medieval Culture*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1954. See also R. VOADEN, *God's Words, Women's Voices*, pp. 33-34.

³¹ For a good overview of the opposition against Birgitta's *Revelations*, see the chapter *Challenging and Championing St Birgitta's Revelations at the Council of Constance and Basel* in M.H. OEN (ed), *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, pp. 103-32.

emphasized the miraculous aspects. The revelations, he explains, were «inscribed in the very heart of the aforesaid lady [Birgitta] by the finger of the living God»³². This, however, was the prophetic norm, according to Alfonso. Both in the Old and New Testament, God chose «the weak things of the world, of both the female and male sex, to show forth his might and put the wise to shame», he argues³³.

As examples of how God once made young and unlettered people to prophets, he offers a list of names, including Judith and Esther, Huldah, Deborah, Hannah and Hagar from the Old Testament; Anna, Elizabeth, and the Virgin for the New Testament; and finally, the Tiburtine and the Erythraean Sibyls. Birgitta is, in other word, compared with all these figures, and especially the association with the Sibyls came to be decisive for her later reception. During the entire Renaissance, Birgitta was constantly compared with the Sibyl or even portrayed as the archaic prophetesses whose wisdom originated in their astrological knowledge³⁴. A telling example is a print from 1526, now in the British Library, in which Birgitta is depicted together with a group of four persons, all on the same level, which testify to their familiarity. Aristotle and Ptolemy are on the right side, a certain brother Reynhart and Birgitta on the left, while the Sibyl is located in the middle, as a figure who bridges the ancient and modern sages³⁵. The image derives from Johannes Lichtenberger's *Prognosticatio*, a book printed for the first time in 1488, and which remained broadly influential for centuries. It contained late medieval prophetic texts and contemporary astrology, including Birgittine revelations (*Onus mundi*), sibylline texts, prophecies attributed to Methodius, Antichrist legends, and prophecies in the tradition of Joachim of Fiore³⁶.

While Alfonso was most careful in his depiction of Birgitta, Mathias Övidsson, the canon of Linköping and Birgitta's Swedish confessor, was not. Mathias, who studied at the University of Paris for several years, was a prolific writer³⁷. When he was given the task of being Birgitta's confessor, he was among other things working on his famous *Exposicio super Apocalypsim*, a commentary on the Biblical book of the Apocalypse, which the Italian preacher Bernadino da Siena later used as a major source for his sermons. Obviously excited about his confessional daughter, he exhorted Birgitta to ask the divine powers while she was in ecstasy whether the book of the Apocalypse really

³² A. PECHA, *Epistola solitarii ad reges*, Rev. VIII: 1. English transl., Vol. 4, p. 15.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 17.

³⁴ R. RAYBOULD, *The Sibyl Series of the Fifteenth Century*, Leiden: Brill, 2017. For representation of Birgitta as a Sibyl, see the two chapters U. FALKEID, 'The most illustrious and divine of all the sibyls.' *Saint Birgitta in the prophetic visions of Tommaso Campanella and Queen Cristina of Sweden*, and J. GOETHALS - A. WAINWRIGHT, *Ventriloquizing Birgitta: The Saint's Prophetic Voice During the Italian Wars*, both printed in the forthcoming book U. FALKEID - A. WAINWRIGHT (eds), *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden* (forthcoming).

³⁵ The print is digitalized by British Museum. [print; book-illustration | British Museum](#).

³⁶ For more information about Lichtenberger's *Prognosticatio* and *Onus mundi*, see Brain Richardson's chapter in U. FALKEID - A. WAINWRIGHT (eds), *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden* (forthcoming).

³⁷ For further information about Mathias of Linköping, see A. PILTZ, *Magister Mathias of Sweden in Theological Context: A Preliminary Survey*, in M. ASZTALOS (ed), *The Editing of Philosophical and Theological Texts from the Middle Ages*, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1986, pp. 137-180.



was written by St. John. The answer is rendered in a revelation (*Rev. V: 89*) where Christ assures that the evangelist John was the same as the author of the Apocalypse.

Mathias' enthusiasm is most clearly expressed in his prologue to Birgitta's *Revelation*, probably written as a defence when the visions were under investigation by a commission that was set up in Uppsala in 1346³⁸. With an echo of prophet Jeremiah's words (5:30) he opens the prologue as follows:

Amazement and wonders have been heard of in our land. When Moses, the zealot of the law, heard the law of fire given unto chastisement of sinners from the midst of the fire of the zeal God, it was amazing indeed. It is more wonderful that in our day the humble and meek in spirit should hear the voice of Jesus Christ, God and man, even as Elijah once heard it in the sound of a gentle breeze. God, who had earlier made a stiff-necked, rude and ignorant people zealous for the justice of his law by means of fear, has now in his gentle mercy used love to bring submission a people instructed in both the old and new covenants³⁹.

Apart from associating Birgitta with Moses—she is remarkably aligned with the prophet in the very opening of the entire oeuvre—another figure appears. Like the Old Testament prophet Elijah, Birgitta is now the one who senses the gentle breeze of God's words whispering in her ears.

The choice of Elijah is not random. Indeed, in the Synoptic Gospels' narrative about Transfiguration of Christ, both Moses and Elijah appear. As such, they are closely connected in the Scripture as they also became in the iconography and the reception history. Significant in this case, however, is how Elijah, both in the Hebrew and the Christian tradition, is associated with the Messiah and with the Messianic Advent⁴⁰. Both Elijah's mysterious ascension to Heaven (2 Kgs. 2:11), and even more the quotation from the Book of Malachi, allude to his role as the harbinger of the «Day of the Lord» and the eschaton:

Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the sons and the hearts of the sons to the fathers, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction (Mal. 4:5-6).

This prophecy about Elijah's return paved the way for his eschatological career both in early Judaism and the Christian tradition⁴¹. Indeed, the Gospels' casting of John the Baptist and Jesus as Elijah *redivivus* (Matt. 17:1-9; Lk. 9:28-36), were legitimized on these verses. In his prologue to the *Revelations*, Mathias changes this pattern by spinning subtle threads between Birgitta and Elijah. As Elijah was interpreted as a threshold figure in the long post-Biblical tradition, Birgitta is carefully depicted as a woman who

³⁸ For information about the commission, see C.G. UNDERHAGEN (ed), *Sancta Birgitta Revelaciones Book I, with Magister Mathias' Prologue*, SFSS ser. 2, VII:1, Uppsala, 1978, pp. 47-50. See also B. MORRIS, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 78.

³⁹ *The prologue by Master Mathias*. English transl., in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. 1, p. 47.

⁴⁰ For a useful survey of the interpretation of Elijah, see E. OTTENHEIJM, *Elijah and the Messiah (b.Sanh. 98a)*, in B.E.J.H. BECKING - H. BARSTAD (eds), *Prophets and Prophecies in Stories*, Leiden, Brill, 2015, pp. 195-213.

⁴¹ E. OTTENHEIJM, *Elijah and the Messiah (b.Sanh. 98a)*, p. 197.

points to the necessity of a sign, the hidden presence of the Messiah, and the recourse to the Law («both the old and new covenants») as a necessary prelude to the reality of a new age.

After the enigmatic opening of his defence, Mathias unfolds his understanding of Birgitta. By dividing the history in three ages, he configures Birgitta as the mediatrix of the imminent transformation of the world. The first age represents the age of the Father: «First came the fear of God like that great wind rending the mountains and crushing the rocks of hardened hearts»⁴². The second age, the age of the Son, is characterized by «the fire of divine charity». As Mathias describes it, God appeared in this fire, «not according to the greatness of his divinity but according to the humble condition of our slavery in which he has redeemed the world»⁴³. The transition from the first age to the second is, in other words, marked by a progress in humility.

The third age represents the ultimate depths of meekness. Now the «great wind» of the first age is transformed to a «gentle breeze» which necessarily represents the third person in the Holy Trinity, i.e. the Spirit. In this breeze, «the Lord, whose nature it is to be merciful, manifests his omnipotent divinity through his great and exalted compassion».⁴⁴ Its power is to bring the humanity together, summoning «all people out of the feverish heat of sin into the peaceful breeze of his mercy»⁴⁵. Thus, the gradual humiliation process—symbolized by the transformation of the great wind into a gentle breeze—is nothing but a progression towards the ultimate salvation of the humanity, and in this progression a widow, «humble and meek in spirit» is given a decisive role. As God revealed himself for Elijah, not in the great wind, nor in the fire, but in the gentle breeze (1 Kings 19:10-18), Birgitta is the Elijah *redivivus* who heralds the return of the Lord.

Mathias of Linköping's tripartite division of the history of salvation reflects a deep familiarity with Joachimite ideas. Apocalyptic and Messianic expectations pervaded late medieval Europe, and above all in the wake of Joachim of Fiore (c.1135-1202) and his comments on the Apocalypse. Especially the Spiritual Franciscans adopted his theory of the three ages, and in the miracles of St. Francis they found exactly this threshold figure, the *alter Christus* (the new Christ) as they often called him, who announced the dawn of the third age.⁴⁶ Through his renewal of the life of the second person in the Trinity, the seraphic saint, who re-enacted the Passion in his own body, inaugurated the

⁴² *The prologue by Master Mathias*. English transl., in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. 1, p. 47.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ For a profound description of the influence of Joachimism on the Franciscans, and especially on the radical branch of the Franciscans, the so-called Spirituals, see M. REEVES, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (1969), Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2011. See also B. MCGINN, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought*, London, Collier Macmillan 1985; *Visions of the End. Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (1979), New York, Columbia University Press, 1998. For the interpretation of St. Francis as a second Christ, see D. BURR, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Prosecution in the Century after Saint Francis*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011; H.W. VAN OS, *St. Francis of Assisi as a Second Christ in Early Italian Painting*, «Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art», 7, 3/1974, pp. 115-132.



last stage of history in which the Holy Spirit would reign, according to the Spirituals. In this context, Mathias' defence of Birgitta is quite remarkable. He simply replaces St. Francis with Birgitta as the figure who initiates the third age after «the many miseries of this aging age»⁴⁷. As he explains, since the time was not mature yet in Christ's own days, his resurrection had to be known progressively by means of many proofs. It is this immanent growth of time, the gradual unfolding of Truth, which makes Birgitta's charisma a miracle. Indeed, according to Mathias somewhat hyperbole explanation, Birgitta's revelations are more extraordinary than the Incarnation itself: «This apparition is even more amazing than the one by which he showed himself in the flesh»⁴⁸.

Despite Birgitta's eager and incessant defence of the church as an historical institution, and not as a pure spiritual phenomenon, as the radical Franciscans proclaimed, her own version of salvation history in three ages (*Rev. VI: 67*) reveals a certain familiarity with the contemporary Joachimite ideas. Likewise, a highly interesting metaphor underpins the construction of her as the heralding figure of the coming age.

According to the hagiographic sources, Birgitta was full of doubt regarding the task Christ had entrusted to her. In a vision (*Rev. II: 18*), once again dated to Sweden in the 1340s, she opens her heart by conveying her worries: «O my Lord, Son of the Virgin, why have you condescended to come as a guest to so base a widow, who is poor in every good work and so weak in understanding and discernment and ridden with sin for so long?»⁴⁹ Christ answers that for him nothing is impossible. He can make a poor person rich and a foolish person intelligent. What he also is able to do, is to restore an aged person to youth:

It is like the phoenix that brings together dried twigs. Among them is the twig of a certain tree that is dry by nature on the outside and warm on the inside. The warmth of the sunbeams comes to it first and kindles it, and then all the twigs are set in fire from it⁵⁰.

As a symbol of the sacrificed Christ who triumphed over death, the phoenix was well-known in the Scandinavian countries, as in rest of Europe⁵¹. In Birgitta's revelations, however, it is Birgitta who is turned into a phoenix. As Christ explains to her, when his love penetrates her heart enkindling her with all the virtue, the miracle is going to happen: «Thoroughly burned by them and purged from sins, you will arise like the rejuvenated bird having put off the skin of sensuality». By the image of the phoenix, the low and ignorant woman is, in other words, transformed into a symbol of redemption. Indeed, like an Elijah *redivivus* or an *alter Christus*, she is consumed by the flames of the divine love for the salvation of the humanity.

⁴⁷ *The prologue by Master Mathias*. English transl., in *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Vol. 1, p. 51.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 50.

⁴⁹ BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN, *Rev. II: 18*. English transl., Vol. 2, p. 72.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ The phoenix appears in a variety of medieval Scandinavian sources, such as in the old Norse poem «Paradisus», gathered in *Heimskringla*. [Paradisus - heimskringla.no](http://Paradisus-heimskringla.no)

4. Conclusion

It has often been claimed that Birgitta was situated as a prophet first *after* her death⁵². As broadly explored in the interdisciplinary research project *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden. Women, Politics and Reform in Renaissance Italy* it was indeed as a prophet or a sibyl she was commemorated and addressed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Birgitta's visions circulated both in Latin and in vernacular around the Italian peninsula, and they spread in manuscripts and in prints⁵³. A series of highly popular apocryphal prophecies and prayers were also attributed to her, and she re-emerged as a central figure of prophetic authority not only in the Italian Wars (1494–1559), but long into the seventeenth century as well. In the treatises by the seventeenth century philosopher Tommaso Campanella in which he expressed his Messianic ideas and the expectations of a coming age of universal peace, she was once again put on the forefront. Indeed, Campanella is referring to her as a saint, a prophet, a divine seer, and finally an «*illustrissima Sybillarum*» (the most illustrious of all the Sibyls)⁵⁴.

My aim in this chapter has, however, been to discuss how the interpretation of Birgitta as a prophet was present in her religious vocation from the very beginning, and not only something that arose by a sudden later in the reception of her work. According to the narrative chronology of Birgitta's *Revelations*, she appeared already in the opening of the first book as a prophet, i.e. a person who due to her charisma, or gifts of grace, offers herself as a spiritual guide to the salvation of the humanity. Although she was followed by several visionary women, such as Catherine of Siena, Francesca Romana, Marie Robin, Constance de Rabastens, and Domenica Narducci, my claim is that few figures from the late Middle Ages, if any at all, can be compared to her. Indeed, as the famous medievalist André Vauchez has described her, she was the fountainhead for the virtual cascade of visionary women to gain prominence in the centuries after her death⁵⁵.

When Alfonso handed over her oeuvre to the pope in the occasion of the petition of her canonization, the *Revelations* represented the most extensive literary work ever authored by a woman. In the wake of Birgitta, lay women started to publish their work, partly inspired by the achievements of the Swedish saint. As scholars have shown, in the sixteenth century alone, more than 200 Italian women published their work, a number that by far surpassed that of other European countries⁵⁶.

⁵² See for instance C. SAHLIN, *Birgitta of Sweden*, pp. 74-76.

⁵³ In addition to the forthcoming volume, the research project also has created the database The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden (<https://birgitta.hf.uio.no>). The database consists of a systematic overview of the extant materials that were produced and circulated in late medieval and early modern Italy, including a substantial bibliography, maps, small biographies of relevant actors, and links to manuscripts and to early printed editions.

⁵⁴ U. FALKEID, 'The most illustrious and divine of all the sibyls.' *Saint Birgitta in the prophetic visions of Tommaso Campanella and Queen Cristina of Sweden*, in U. FALKEID - A. WAINWRIGHT (eds), *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden* (forthcoming).

⁵⁵ A. VAUCHEZ, *Laité in the Middle Ages: The Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices* (1987), Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1993, pp. 220-224.

⁵⁶ See especially V. COX, *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400-1650*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008; B. RICHARDSON, *Women and the Circulation of Texts in Renaissance Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge



The question why a foreigner, a pilgrim from the far north, should receive such an authority in the political and religious centre of the Catholic Christianity, remains a mystery. What is clear, though, is that Birgitta's *Revelations*, together with a series of other early hagiographic sources connected to her name, such as the biographies and the testimonies from the canonization process, generate a potent image of a visionary woman, a female *auctor* and redeemer, whose role was to transcend the expected limits of her sex saving the humanity on the threshold of the modernity.

University Press, 2020; and D. ROBIN, *Publishing Women: Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007.